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ABSTRACT

Current policies and practices governing the transfer of credit at the University of Pittsburgh were reviewed. Both the general policies of the university and the specific policies of the School of General Studies, the degree granting unit, were included for study. Consideration has been given to expediting the progress of mature adults through the degree program by enabling them to benefit from their former education. A university manual defines how credits are transferred by transcript and what is meant by "advanced standing" and "advanced placement." Determination of the transferability of credits is considered an academic responsibility of specific departments. Policies of the School of General Studies on the process of transferring credits, advanced placement and/or credit by examination, and alternative methods through which credit may be awarded toward a baccalaureate degree are outlined. The need for higher education institutions to have centralization and delineation of procedures for determining the acceptance of previously earned credits is stressed. (SW)

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TRANSFERRING ACADEMIC CREDITS AMONG DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS: AN EXAMPLE OF POLICY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

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TRANSFERRING ACADEMIC CREDITS AMONG DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS:
AN EXAMPLE OF POLICY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

One of the most difficult problems confronting institutions of higher education is the issue of the transfer of academic credits earned at one institution to another higher education institution.

Evaluation of prior earned credits is complicated by factors such as differing requirements among institutions for educational programs, the lack of common standards for the number of credits transferrable both in total and relative to a particular course, the continuing enforcement of a residency requirement, and the practice of applying the statute of limitations to courses on the basis of the passage of a specified number of years since attendance.

Recent efforts, such as the Carnegie Commission's advocacy of more flexibility in institutional practices, have led to a re-examination of the transfer and acceptance of credits in both general and specific circumstances.

Many complex issues and competing philosophies arise in the formulation stages of policy making due to the various ways in which credits are offered by different types of schools and academic programs. One problem involves the transfer of credits between lower level and upper level institutions. Another involves acceptance by a department of transfer credits which would meet all of their major program requirements leaving the student only courses outside the department to complete the degree. These are merely illustrative of a wide range of problems from an institutional perspective. The new non-traditional programs have brought different kinds of problems to the question of transfer of prior credits. For example, should the credits awarded for practical experience or through special examination be accepted by traditional programs towards their degree requirements? Are such credits

applicable to a graduate degree or is there a level beyond which they cannot be applied?

With an ever-increasing segment of the population (particularly adult students) desiring participation in the American educational system, questions pertaining to opportunities and limitations in transferring credit between academic institutions must be addressed. Certainly traditional students' problems with transfer still exist and can not be minimized and even though individual circumstances never have and never can be covered in an inclusive policy, it is critical that colleges and universities review their policies and practices governing the disposition of credits earned by students following their previous attendance at another institution particularly when a long period of time has passed between the attendance and the request for transfer.

As part of the developmental process of the non-traditional major in Long Term Care Administration, it was felt that a review of current policies and practices governing the transfer of credit at the University of Pittsburgh should be undertaken. Both the general policies of the University and the specific policies of the School of General Studies, the degree granting unit, would be included in the examination. Concern for expediting the progress of mature adults through the degree program by enabling them to benefit from their former education was prompted by an analysis of the backgrounds of applicants to the program which showed that slightly less than half of this group had prior earned college credits. The period in which these credits had been earned extended from 1943 to 1976. Acceptance of prior earned credits by the University could mean a substantial shortening of the time in which a degree could be earned by almost half of the students and could also be beneficial to the rest of the group in varying degrees.

Within a large institution, such as the University of Pittsburgh, there are bound to be some variations among different schools and programs related to the acceptance of work completed at another institution. In general, four-year colleges and universities accept credits received at a junior or community college with some reluctance. But not unlike most, the University of Pittsburgh has formal guidelines governing the entrance of transfer credits into the record system.

The University of Pittsburgh Standard Practice Instruction Manual defines both how credits are "transferred by transcript" and what constitutes "advanced standing" in contrast to "advanced placement." These definitions are as follows:

(1) Transfer by Transcript - Courses, grades, and credits transferred from another institution via an official transcript which has been approved by the involved school: the entry on the Registrar's records will show that these were accepted by transfer and the name of the school from which the transfer was accepted. The credit hours of those courses accepted will be added to those earned at the University.

(2) Advanced Standing - Grade and credit for a course not actually taken at this University but for which the student demonstrated his competence to the appropriate University faculty by examination or otherwise: the course, grade, and credits will be entered in the Registrar's records in the same manner as for courses actually taken here.

(3) Advanced Placement - A department may approve a student taking an advanced course without having taken the preceding or prerequisite course. Such approval does not add courses or credits for the prerequisite course to the records, therefore, such preceding or prerequisite course will not be recorded by the Registrar.

In reviewing these definitions used by the University of Pittsburgh, it becomes clear that while policy is enunciated pertaining to the recording on the official University Transcript of courses, credits, and grades from other institutions, little guidance is offered pertaining to the actual determination of transferability. Policies governing this basic but major issue are considered an academic responsibility and are delegated to individual

schools which in turn, establish their own specific practices for accepting transfer credits within the confines of the overall, broad University policy statements pertaining to the mechanics of transfer. With such broad latitude in policy making, it appears that within the University the potential exists for substantial differences between departments and within departments, for wide differences between programs.

The policies governing the acceptance of transfer credits by the School of General Studies (SGS), the degree-granting unit then became the primary focus of the study.

With respect to policies and procedures pertaining to "transfer credits," the 1977-1979 University of Pittsburgh SGS Bulletin reports:

> Official transcripts for each accredited college or university attended must be submitted whether or not it is intended that the courses be counted toward a degree. For acceptance, courses must be passed with a satisfactory grade (C or the equivalent). Grades for transfer credits are not used in computing a student's quality point average (QPA) or academic standing in SGS.
>
> All credits eligible for transfer are subject to the following regulations:
>
> (1) Courses must correspond with those offered by SGS in objectives and content.
>
> (2) The number of credits granted for a given course cannot exceed the number on the transcript from the school where they were earned, nor can it exceed the number earned in the corresponding course in SGS.
>
> (3) A maximum of 90 credits may be transferred from a four-year institution and 60 credits from a two-year institution.
>
> (4) While SGS does not have a statute of limitations, it reserves the right to invalidate transfer credits for some courses in which the content is outmoded.
>
> (5) The final 30 credits must be earned in SGS. At least 15 of these credits must be completed in the major or area of concentration.

(6) Students majoring in the liberal arts may transfer a maximum of 12 credits from professional courses.

(7) Transfer credits will be posted on the University of Pittsburgh transcript only after a student has completed 30 credits in SCS. Students with 90 transfer credits will have them posted after completing 15 credits in SCS.

(8) All transfer credits are subject to reevaluation if a student transfers from one school to another within the University of Pittsburgh.

(9) If a course for which advanced-standing credit has been granted is repeated, the advanced-standing credit is cancelled.

Advanced placement and/or credit by examination is possible in areas of general education course requirements according to SCS policies. The SCS Bulletin addresses specific regulations and mechanisms for achieving such an option.

The College-Level Examination Program - The basic purpose of the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) is to enable those individuals who have attained college-level education in non-traditional ways to access their achievement and use these test results in seeking college advanced placement in a selected program of studies.

SCS, cognizant of the diversified backgrounds of its student population, utilizes the general examinations of the CLEP as a means of evaluating adult candidates for advanced placement after admission to the School. The general examinations consist of five areas: English Composition, Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Mathematics.

The College-Level Examination Program Credit Bank - The Credit Bank is a system established to accelerate students planning to transfer to SCS after completion of study at two-year institutions, such as community colleges. This program is also available to members of the Armed Forces currently taking college courses through the University of Maryland extension centers and other accredited colleges and universities.

Further regulations govern CLEP advanced standing credit, including:

(1) Students must have completed high school or its equivalent, be 20 years old or two years beyond high school.

(2) Students admitted to SCS without prior transfer college credits must complete all CLEP examinations before

earning 15 credits.

(3) Students admitted to SGS with transfer credits also are required to complete all CLEP examinations before earning 15 credits in SGS, and it is mandatory that CLEP examinations be completed before transfer and SGS credits total 30 credits. (The 30-credit rule may be waived up to 45 credits by the Director of Special Academic Services for students who have not attended college for four years or longer.)

(4) All duplicative credits earned in course work here or accepted from any institution will be deducted from the advanced standing indicated by CLEP score.

(5) Transfer students from other colleges and universities, who took CLEP general examinations early in their program of studies at the previous institutions, will be evaluated and granted CLEP advanced standing in accordance with SGS policy and cut-off scores.

In addition, SGS policy speaks to alternative methods through which credit may awarded toward a baccalaureate degree.

Course-Specific Credit by Examinaiton - Students may earn credits toward graduation by taking advanced-standing examinations in courses offered in SGS. Such examinations must be arranged through the Dean's Office with the department or school normally teaching the course for which credit is desired. Most courses, except those with laboratories, special restrictions, or in the performing arts, may be challenged by examination. Course-specific credit by examination is open to all students enrolled in SGS who are in good academic standing.

Special Assessment - Credit by special assessment is intended primarily for evaluating experiences equivalent to a college practicum, field placement or internship program. Special assessment may also be used when a course-challenge examination is deemed inappropriate. In such cases, and with the approval of the school or department supervising the course, practicum, field placement, or internship, faculty panels consisting of three or more faculty members who are experts in the field will be established. Special assessment may include oral, written, and performance examinations and proof of other candidate accomplishments that the panelists may deem appropriate. For acceptance, the grade assigned must be passing (C,S) or above. Course credit by special assessment is open to all students enrolled in SGS programs who are in good academic standing. All decisions based on special assessment must be approved by the Dean of SGS.

The fact that long term care content is included in exceptionally few health

administration programs makes it very difficult, if not impossible at this time, for a student to receive advanced placement in lieu of any course in the major.[1]

As may be inferred from the SCE policy statements, the process of transferring credits is beset for students with a number of restrictions designed to protect the institution. Lacking specific criteria outlining how the evaluator would determine the comparability of the content, the level of the instruction, and the quality of the learning for both course specific examinations and special assessment, the only apparent advantage for students is that a broad policy statement exists in SCE permitting such alternatives to course requirements. One cannot assume, however, because SCE permits these practices that the academic departments have developed the necessary criteria or, in fact, that they have even adopted the policy.

The case example of the University of Pittsburgh policies for the transfer and acceptance of credits illustrates both technical and substantive problems associated with these practices from both an institutional and a student standpoint. That there are serious problems cannot be denied nor can the responsibility of an educational institution for the protection of its degrees be subordinated to new fads in education. That is not to imply that alternatives to course requirements are fads - but that in their implementation the methods adopted must reflect the best judgment of academicians attuned to the best interests of the students. Then the administrative mechanisms must facilitate the implementation of the process in each case. Too often the lack of coordination among the administrative components of an institution coupled with the

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[1] At the time of this study one student had applied for and received transfer credits for a course in Introductory Gerontology.

apparent lack of an explicit procedural mechanism for the evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits has created avoidable problems for all concerned.

In an era of growing acceptance of alternative means to meet traditional academic requirements, it is fundamental to establish both institution-wide policies as well as ones specific to the program to which the student may be applying. However, in both instances, these policies must be followed by clear and understandable guidelines to permit their implementation. In that regard, there appears to be a need for both the centralization and the delineation of procedures for determining the acceptance of previously earned credits. Adequate communication and counseling of applicants or incoming students, before and after transfer, are critical for later student success. In a non-traditional program, it becomes even more important that policies and procedures related to the acceptance of transfer credits are enunciated clearly and administered through a single component of the University. Such a component must not only be fully familiar with the requirements of both the University and the degree granting unit, but must also be fully cognizant of the academic program in question and the circumstances of the non-traditional student body to be enrolled.